

Tinian on Trial

By Kathy Tyers; Illustrations by Mike Vilardi

Tinian l'att, the granddaughter and heiress of l'att Armament's founders, wrinkled her nose and tried not to breathe too deeply. The factory complex's demonstration room smelled like scorched meat and chemicals. She could identify five ... no, seven formulas by their odors, a potentially catastrophic witch's brew. Occasionally, the demonstration explosives detonated harder, faster, or earlier than anyone anticipated, and even quadruple transparisteel didn't provide full protection.

Standing beside Grandfather Strephan, Daye Azur-Jamin rested his hand on a waist-high blast barricade. Daye's l'att Armament gray tunic accentuated his air of authority. So did the management comlink he wore on his belt. A prematurely gray streak marked the center of Daye's left eyebrow. "There's nothing patently wrong with stormtrooper armor, your excellency," he said, and Tinian admired his self-control. She knew how Daye felt about Grandfather's Imperial connections. "But a good marksman -- or an idiot with a high-powered blaster -- can pick out weak spots. Our field makes it invulnerable."

Imperial Moff Eisen Kerieth slapped a polished ebony swagger stick into one palm. Tall and lean, Moff Kerieth held his head thrust forward over an astonishing array of red and blue rank squares. Tinian, Daye, and her grandparents had expected tech advisors for this demonstration, and maybe a few army troopers, but never a Sector Moff with stormtrooper escort. Kerieth limped, favoring a stiff left leg and occasionally leaning on the swagger stick. "Sounds wonderful, boy. So why did your demonstration employee turn coward?"

Grandfather Strephan's old black Imperial service uniform set off his thick white hair. Grandmother Augusta fiddled with a side hem of her long green robe. She'd recently developed a rare degenerative syndrome, and Druckenwell's top bioimmunological specialist gave her only months to live unless she sought treatment. It wasn't available here in Il Avali, or at any other city on Druckenwell ... and it was expensive. Behind Grandmother Augusta, the l'att family's Wookiee bodyguard Wrrlevgebev lounged against a pebbly gray duracrete wall. Wrrl rumbled a quick comment under his breath that only Tinian -- who'd studied his language -- could translate.

She didn't, but she shared Wrrl's disdain for cowardly employees. She fiddled with a collection of paraphernalia in her jumpsuit pocket: neka nut shells, droid adjustment tools, and her secret good-luck piece.

She would need all her good luck today. If l'att Armament sold its new armor-protective field, then her grandparents could retire, and she and Daye would take over the factory.

Kerieth straightened his shoulders and neck, then poked Grandfather with his swagger stick. "Well, l'att? Who's going to get into that armor? We came a long way to see this." Evidently Grandfather had known the Moff years ago. Each man had chosen his own way to serve the New Order: Grandfather by protecting Imperial might, Kerieth by wielding it. Kerieth crooked a finger at Wrrl. "You. Wookiee. Come down here."

Wrrl curled back his lips from huge teeth and let out a punctuated howl. Kerieth had demanded that the l'atts disarm their Wookiee during his visitation, and Wrrl was already irritated. A red-blond stripe crossed Wrrl's face, fur almost the same shade as Tinian's shoulder-length hair. It was odd coloration for a Wookiee.

"What did he say, Tinian?" Grandfather's business acumen showed in the way he measured and accommodated the Moff. By comparison, Kerieth seemed ...

Tinian tried to emulate her observant grandfather. Kerieth seemed blunt. And condescending.

She glanced at the shell pieces on the arming table. Eighteen white units lay beside the limp halves of a two-piece black body glove. Wrrl wouldn't fit inside the body glove, let alone the field. "Your excellency, he's too big," she translated. "The field nodes maximize at one point eight six meters of height and one meter of width."

Moll Kerieth lifted a narrow black eyebrow. "l'att, tell me again why your grandchild attends classified demonstrations."



Tinian bristled. She might be small and thin, but she was no child. Hadn't Keriioth noticed her company jumpsuit?

Grandfather laid a warm hand on her arm. "Your excellency, Tinian is an invaluable team member. She has amazing instincts for explosives."

One stormtrooper stood at the center of the second seating row up. "Sir," he said through his helmet filter, "if the Wookiee's too tall, what about her?"

Tinian blanched. Her ... demonstrate? Stand in the wave trap and get shot at? "From one extreme to the other," quipped Keriioth. "Invaluable team member, is she?" Grandfather backed toward a code panel. From this wall, he could lower two quadruple-transparisteel blast walls between the wave trap and the four broad rows of retractable shielded seating.

"Ah ... yes, but Tinian is not our demonstration volunteer."

Keriioth shifted his weight. "She would fit. Are you totally confident that your armor is impervious to blaster fire?"

"Totally," murmured Grandfather.

"Then prove it."

"But ... no. I shall call for a line droid."

"I perceive a certain lack of confidence." Moff Keriioth directed the taunt at his stormtroopers, but Tinian took it in the gut. Grandfather and Grandmother must reach that of fworld health care facility. Love focused Tinian's courage, and so did her hopes. The field worked. She'd seen it tested.

"Grandfather?" She raised a hand. "I'll volunteer."

Grandfather, Grandmother, and Daye stepped forward, speaking simultaneously: "Wait -- " "Tinian -- " "No -- "

Wrrl blinked huge blue eyes and suggested under his breath that Daye was built more like a stormtrooper than she was.

Tinian fixed Moff Keriioth with her stare. She was betting he'd act like a BlasTech Company bureaucrat she'd once met at a party -- once he'd suggested something, no other idea would suit him.

Keriioth's smile spread slowly from his thin lips to cold, dark eyes. "Very good, ah, Tinian. A true trial of I'att Armament's excellence."

Before Tinian could change her mind, she dragged Wrrl to the arming table. "Help me," she ordered him.

Her jumpsuit would easily fit inside the black body glove. She also selected the upper-body corselet, the carapace and the breastplate, which armorers dubbed the Body Bucket when worn together. She shoved them at Wrrl. Rear-mounted on the carapace, in place of the usual instrument pack, I'att Armament droids had installed a heat dissipator and the field transmitter. A single new control stood out on the breastplate.

She slipped off her shoes and slid one leg into the body glove. She'd never heard so much silence.

"Grandfather," she suggested, "explain how the body glove enhances the field."

"Tinian," Grandfather pleaded.

The glove's leggings sagged on her with wrinkles all down their length. She yanked her narrow jumpsuit belt out of its loops and secured the heavy black fabric. "I've memorized the speech," she insisted. "Should I deliver it?"

Moff Keriioth rested his swagger stick on one shoulder. "Please do," he purred. Suddenly she disliked him. Daye had always insisted that he'd rather die in a noble cause than earn his living from an ignoble one, and she hoped this was only her nerves, whining out from the spot where she was stuffing them (to keep Daye from trying to stop her), that made Keriioth look suddenly sinister.

Daye was sensitive to an energy field he called the Force. He claimed that Force-sensitive was not a healthy way to be in Emperor Palpatine's New Order, and he'd cautioned Tinian and her grandparents that the Empire

had stooped to violent repression in other parts of the galaxy... but Tinian didn't believe it. I'att Armament had supplied the New Order for years, profiting handsomely.

She shrugged into the body glove's top. As she smoothed loose black fabric over the floppy mess at her waist, she drew a deep breath. "The protective field produces anti-energy bursts just out of phase with blaster fire," she began. "Zersium flecks that we've bonded into the advanced body glove -- "Tinian pushed up one slack sleeve and ran the back of her hand over the other forearm "-- amplify the field. We see that as a key element of this new system --"

"The entire system has too often proved vulnerable." Kerieth's voice rose. "Eight years ago, I had a stormtrooper escort shot to pieces around me. I've dragged this ever since." He whacked his left leg with the swagger stick. "Are you comfortable in there, child?"

I'm not a child. "I'm fine." She squared her shoulders. "I'm sorry about your leg. May I finish?"

He swung the swagger stick. "By all means."

"We have thus eliminated weak spots," she said, "long known to insurrectionist elements. I'm ready, Wrrl."

Her Wookiee lifted the breastplate and carapace. Grandmother Augusta folded trembling hands in front of her long green robe. Daye took up a position behind Tinian. If she hesitated or even flinched, she guessed he'd demand to wear the armor.

She hefted the carapace. "There is insulation and a heat dissipator built into this piece," she explained, raising the back protector so Moff Kerieth and his escorts could see inside it. A black sleeve flopped down to cover her other palm. She pushed it up, bunching fabric back toward her elbow. "For the microsecond it takes for the field to reach full efficiency, the armor itself handles heat absorption. Insulation, plus this dissipator, almost eliminate thermal discomfort."

"Allegedly." Kerieth sounded sarcastic.

Tinian decided that she'd never please him except by demonstrating the product. Then he'd be impressed. Then he'd grant I'att Armament the most lucrative contract it'd ever earned. Thousands of stormtroopers would need this coverage. "Help me, Wrrl."

Wrrl fitted the corselet to Tinian's back and front, clamping it together at her shoulders. Tinian trusted Wrrl completely. Five years ago, she'd spotted him being beaten by a slave dealer. Bloody bunches of fur had littered the ground around the huge alien. Tinian -- barely twelve -- had dashed forward, disregarding Grandmother Augusta's protests (she could always move faster than either grandparent). She'd saved the creature's life. Little had she known that in rescuing Wrrl, she'd bought loyalty-to-the-death.

The shell pieces hung out over her shoulders. Tinian wriggled until they balanced.

Daye picked up the shoulder pauldrons, clasping them between long, sensitive hands. "Put these on, too," he murmured. The gray streak arched higher than the rest of either of his eyebrows. According to Druckenwell's strict population laws, she and Daye were too young to marry until they proved financial independence. Slender and bookish-looking with lively brown eyes, Daye had come to Il Avali to make a life for himself.

He was now officially Tinian's Second Undersupervisor and the very center of her life. She let him attach the pauldrons over her shoulders. They dangled to cover her elbows, enclosing her upper



body with a loose, ill-fitting box. Field conduits clacked against each other when she turned toward Daye. If only she could reassure him --

"I know why you're doing this." He leaned close and stared down at her. "I don't like it, but I understand. No one ever calls you a coward and gets away with it." He squeezed her forearm. "Force be with you, love."

As he backed away, Tinian rotated a control on the breastplate. The first time she'd seen this field demonstrated, she'd worried at this point. The field didn't hum, buzz, sparkle, or even glimmer. "Grandfather?"

As if awakening from the dead, he raised a small luma. Tinian held out her arm to one side. He switched on the luma. No bright spot appeared on her sleeve.

"As energy encounters the anti-energy field," Grandfather said, regaining his voice, "the field responds and cancels it. We're now certain the field is operating."

"Ready, Tinian?" the Moff asked. His voice was as bland as if he were inviting her to sit down for lunch instead of ordering her out in front of a firing squad.

Tinian stalked to the wave trap, feeling ridiculous inside the enormous bucket, pauldrons, and body glove. Built like a pocket at one end of the spacious demonstration room, the wave trap's baffled duracrete walls and floor angled together to absorb unthinkable bursts of energy. Tiny shadowed pits in its walls gave evidence of past demonstrations.

At least she couldn't smell the room anymore. Even without a helmet, the odor had stopped registering several minutes ago.

Daye stood close to the barricade, frowning. She drew up tall -- for her height -- and barely smiled across at him. Wrrl edged toward the code panel.

Kerioth swept his swagger stick toward three stormtroopers. "You three. Rifles," he snapped. They marched forward. Daye held both hands down at his sides. Usually, he kept one or both casually tucked in a pocket.

Tinian stared at the blast rifles. Those weren't the shiny new factory items she generally dealt with.

Daye glared at the nearest stormtrooper.

"Ready," snapped the Moff. Three rifles lifted. "Aim for weak spots."

Kerioth turned to eye Tinian. His lip curled. Evidently he enjoyed watching the I'att contingent sweat.

She knew that the armor worked. But staring down three rifle shafts, she momentarily lost control of her panic.

Instantly, Daye's face reflected her fear. He spun toward the trooper and tentatively reached for his rifle.

"Now," Kerioth ordered.

Three vermilion energy beams whizzed at Tinian's chest. She flinched, but she couldn't dodge quickly enough. Heat flashed over her back and shoulders despite the bucket's extra insulation. Daye froze and stared, stricken.

"Cease fire." Kerioth twirled his swagger stick.

Tinian straightened back up, let out her breath, then smiled weakly at Daye. The sale was as good as made. She'd done it, though she wished she hadn't tried to duck. Daye thrust a hand into his pocket and frowned. Her momentary panic had probably jabbed him deeper than it'd frightened her.

Kerioth slipped a comlink out of his belt sheath. "Squads three, four, and five: seal entrances. No traffic or communication off grounds."

"Excuse me?" Grandfather stepped forward, obviously as confused as Tinian abruptly felt. "Sir, what is the meaning of this?"

Moff Kerioth tapped Grandfather's shoulder with his swagger stick. "Congratulations, I'att. I am buying your product."

"You sealed our entrances."

Kerioth clasped his hands at the small of his back. "It would be unfortunate if insurrectionist elements learned that we'd found a way to make stormtrooper armor invincible, would it not?"

We found a way? Tinian silently protested.

Grandmother Augusta glided forward, rustling her robes. "Our security has always been unparalleled, Moff Kerioth. You need have no fear concerning our -- "

"*Naturally*, then," continued Moff Kerioth, "you understand that everyone who has worked above certain levels on this project must return with me to the Doldur system. This item must be manufactured under strictly regulated conditions. The New Order controls Doldur right down to food prices. It is the safest world for advanced military manufacturing."

It's your turf, Tinian realized. *You want this manufactured where you can watch.*

Grandfather's eyes narrowed. "I am sorry, but this family cannot travel. Augusta needs medical care."

Tinian fingered the black body glove's sleeve selvage. "After all these years of hard work, they deserve peaceful retirement," she protested. "Daye and I are prepared to run the plant. We'll ... " She hesitated, then plunged on. It was the only way. "We'll go to Doldur with you. But Grandfather and Grandmother are retiring to Geridard."

"No," said Kerioth. "You will return to Doldur with me. All of you."

"Sir," Augusta spoke up, "I apologize for making things difficult, but our application for the Geridard Convalescent Center has already been processed. We've advanced them 90,000 credits for life care."

Kerioth turned away. He tilted his chin as if rereading the l'atts' requests off the ceiling. When he pivoted back around, his condescending smile had returned. "You will not travel to Doldur? I cannot convince you?"

"Unfortunately, sir, it's impossible." Strephan folded his arms over his black uniform's decorated breast.

"Perhaps not so unfortunate. That enables me to dispose of your retirement and health worries simultaneously." Kerioth swung his swagger stick at the nearest stormtrooper. "Take them both."

Before Tinian understood, the stormtrooper whipped up his blast rifle and fired twice. Grandfather Strephan tumbled to the duracrete. Augusta gasped before she collapsed over Strephan.

They didn't move again. Too shocked to protest, Tinian covered her mouth with both hands. Daye bent his knees, ready to lunge. "Why did you do that?" he whispered.

Kerioth angled his swagger stick like a weapon at Daye's chest. "I'll let you youngsters in on a secret," he announced. "I have been sponsoring research into this type of anti-blast energy field on Doldur. Emperor Palpatine will be most grateful when I present this invention as my own ... with all the uncooperatives out of the way."

"You do wish to cooperate?" he asked blandly.

Grandfather! Grandmother! Stunned by her grief and horror, Tinian had to survive ... to avenge them. She nodded. *Say yes!* she mentally begged Daye.

He straightened slowly, but he didn't speak.





Kerioth shrugged. "Binders for the boy," he ordered another trooper. "How long and how comfortably you live, boy, will depend on how well you *cooperate*." He stressed the word again.

Daye adjusted his stance, turning both feet out slightly. One trooper reached into a utility-belt compartment. Tinian glanced from the trooper to Daye. Daye eyed the trooper. Daye had learned some self-defense from Wrrl. He could move faster than anyone expected.

She must create a distraction.

"Wrrl!" she cried. "Help!" She spun around and dashed for the door.

Wrrl's roar frightened even Tinian. He slammed the code panel with one gigantic paw. A transparisteel blast wall plunged out of the ceiling, trapping Kerioth and two stormtroopers on the inside.

But four troopers remained. Wrrl rushed the pair blocking the exit, lifted each by a shoulder, and bashed their helmets together. Tinian sprang through.

"Go left!" Daye shouted behind her. "Wrrl, stay with Tinian!"

Tinian whirled left and tried to run. One of her loose leggings tripped her. Blaster fire whizzed over her head. Wrrl tried to scoop her up with long shaggy arms. Fur shriveled where he touched her.

"Don't!" she cried. The field unpredictably damaged living flesh that touched it. Tinian scrambled to her feet. Wrrl sprinted past a bewildered-looking service droid. She caught a whiff of burned fur. "Daye?" she cried. "Wrrl, where's -- "

Wrrl shrieked something about separating the stormtroopers.

They reached the lift tube. Tinian jumped onto its floor grid. It didn't activate to carry her upward. "They've shut it off!" she cried. Wrrl stepped in front of her, clearly inviting her to climb onto his back.

There was no other way out of this bottleneck. Tinian switched off the armor field, vaulted up, and clenched her hands in front of Wrrl's throat, hoping nobody shot at them. Singed, matted fur brushed her face. The stormtrooper-sized breastplate dug into her stomach.

Wrrl leaped up the shaft wall, catching enormous claws -- she hadn't even known that he had claws! -- in its duracrete sides. Powerful muscles rippled under Tinian's hold. She clenched her knees around his sides, trying to keep her weight from choking him.

He dragged his weight and hers up to the main floor. A security droid rolled toward them, four claw-mounted blasters and scanners installed atop a perfectly balanced sphere. It endlessly repeated, "Halt! Drop all weapons! Halt --"

Tinian gulped a deep breath. "Recognition," she shouted over Wrrl's shoulder. Her voice ought to shut it off ...

"Confirmed." The droid spun in place. It retreated, still broadcasting.



Daylight shone through the southeastern service door. Another pair of stormtroopers crouched beside it, obviously alerted over Keriath's comlink. "Freeze," ordered one.

Tinian slid off Wrrl's back and slapped the field control back on. Then she dashed at them, too full of adrenaline to cower or even flinch this time.

While the troopers fired at Tinian, Wrrl sped past her on long, shaggy limbs. He reached them before she did and bodily flung them aside.

She'd never seen a Wookiee's full strength before. He terrified her.

Outside the service door, two energy-fenced conveyors connected the entry with I'att Armament's main receiving area. Wrrl howled encouragement at her.

Tinian leaped onto one conveyor and dashed toward the open spaces and freedom. Fabric flapped around her feet, dangling but giving her feet some protection. She grabbed a fistful of loose fabric above each knee and pulled up. That helped a little, but she couldn't bend her elbows far enough to do any real good.

She jumped off the conveyor onto gray duracrete. A three-meter wall surrounded the complex, surmounted by a catwalk with heavy gun emplacements. When Tinian glanced up, her heart sank. Five stormtroopers dashed along the top of the wall, three from the north and two from the west, converging on the corner ahead of her and Wrrl.

Then she remembered her good-luck piece. "Wait!" she cried. She dug down through layers of clothing and extricated a small hunk of chepatite impact explosive. She'd picked it up the first day Grandfather (her mind spasmed in pure, illogical grief: *Grandfather!*) had let her work a full shift. A silly souvenir and dangerous, maybe; but she couldn't fling it hard enough to set it off.

Wrrl could. "Take this," she exclaimed. "Throw it -- there." She pointed at the big corner gun. Two troopers aligned its sights on her and the Wookiee. "Then duck."

Wrrl bared his teeth, seized the explosive, and hurled it. Sweat trickled down Tinian's chest. She was roasting --

Dust, grit, and duracrete boulders blasted in all directions. A gap appeared beneath where the gun had been. Tinian sprinted toward it. Her shoulders and back flashed hot again. More troopers must have rushed in behind her.

The rubble pile was almost two meters high. Wrrl urged her to hurry.

Tinian yanked the bunched fabric and scrabbled upward. "How bad -- are -- you hurt?" she gasped. He growled defiance.

"Wrrl - you need - a medic - "

He tossed his head and kept running.

Tinian scrambled over the top. A laser blast whizzed off her right pauldron. That blast came from outside the wall! She flung herself backward into Wrrl's arms.

Wrrl yipped surprise. Had she singed him again?

He shoved her aside, grabbed a duracrete boulder, and heaved it down at the outside trooper. Then he woofed gently at Tinian, urging her out.

A blast from behind struck him. He howled. "Are you all right?" Tinian cried.

He gurgled and pointed outside the wall. "Not without you!"

Disregarding the armor field, he cuffed her with a huge paw. Tinian jumped down the rubble pile, spun around, and glanced up.

Wrrl stood framed by the gap. Another bolt caught him in his side. He screamed and turned full around, then lurched toward the stormtroopers inside the enormous guard wall.

Grief-stricken and stumbling with every other step, Tinian dashed across a weedy field that surrounded I'att Armament. This was a secure area, maintained in case of internal disaster ... and to enable guard wall staff to watch incoming traffic.

Why weren't they chasing her? Had Wrrl stopped all of them?

Wearing heat dissipation armor, she'd shine like a beacon to IR sensors. It would be easy to tag her with heavy weaponry. Moff Kerioth was probably calling over to Il Avali Spaceport right now.

How could she have been so wrong about the Empire? When had it changed?

At the weed field's edge, dilapidated duracrete buildings formed a toothy perimeter. Tinian slapped off the field projector and stumbled toward an abandoned warehouse. Its door hung askew. Two maybe-human derelicts scrambled deeper into shadows inside.

Tinian tried to imagine what they'd seen: the top half of an armless, unhelmeted stormtrooper? She pushed away from that warehouse and ran two more turns around bends in the alleys, but didn't find any better cover.

She shoved the flapping armor pieces up over her head, then shed the black glove like an old reptile skin. She was about to abandon it when a thought bigger than fear struck her: Moff Kerioth wanted this protection field badly enough to kill for it. She must use it to hurt Eisen Kerioth.

She dug her utility vibro-knife out of another jumpsuit pocket. Painstakingly she sliced vital components off the breastplate -- three electronic c-boards, controls, conduits -- then the carapace -- insulation, plus the projector itself.

Overhead movement snagged her peripheral vision. A silent repulsorcraft sped over the warehouse row.

Tinian shrank into the nearest building's shadow. She stuffed everything small into her pocket along with her vibro-knife. Then she bundled the rest of the vital parts together. Dashing barefoot around the next corner, she stepped on something sharp and almost fell into a rubbish heap ready for droid pickup.

That gave her another idea. Limping, she hurried back to the debris she'd left. She scooped shell fragments into the body glove and flung them behind the rubbish, safer from detection. Then she limped deeper into Il Avali's bad quarter.

Happy's Landing must be nearby. She and Daye had visited the alehouse several times, thinly disguised in working-class coveralls, looking for good music and flamingly spicy food. Luck and adrenaline got her there after only one wrong turn. She paused in the doorway, then plunged into its dark interior without giving her eyes time to adjust. It sounded nearly vacant. Late afternoon had never been Happy's busy hour.

She tripped over a bench. Nobody protested, so it must be vacant. She sank down, exhausted and ashamed. She had to get off Druckenwell, the only world she'd ever known.

But how? And ... alone? Daye would meet her here, if he could.

She swallowed on a parched throat. Mustn't use her credit account. She dug into a third jumpsuit pocket and found a few credit tokens worth a cold glass of Elba water. She dropped them onto the table.

Then she pillowed her sweaty forehead on her arms and tried to think. She couldn't've gotten this far unless Kerioth had sent most of his troopers chasing Daye. Therefore, Daye must be a prisoner. (Her mind writhed again: *Daye! Wrrl, oh, Wrrl!*)

On second thought, she'd worn the invaluable armor. They'd've all chased her. No, he'd codeveloped the anti-energy field. They needed Daye alive. Kerioth was undoubtedly tracking them both --

* * *

Daye Azur-Jamin flattened on the floor of a narrow service tunnel, scarcely breathing. During his first moments of flight, he'd been clipped by blaster fire halfway down his left thigh. It'd stopped throbbing several minutes ago. Now it simply felt dead.

Three pairs of white boots scurried past, outside the shaft's access panel. They'd find him sooner or later.

Daye dragged himself past the panel, deeper toward the center of I'att Armament.

Using his tiny comlink, he'd monitored Eisen Kerioth's command frequency. Poor Wrrl had paid off his life debt in full, and enabled Tinian to elude pursuit, but Kerioth -- who'd escaped his transparisteel cage by talking a trooper through code permutations -- had ordered repulsorcraft. They'd catch Tinian quickly unless he could divert them.

Daye's comlink also let him follow stormtrooper teams as they hunted him. Kerioth had ordered all personnel off factory grounds -- he meant to use IR scanning, and fewer warm footprints inside the factory would help.

It would be a race, then. I'att Armament's power grid lay under a force shield, open to the sky; the plant was built around it like a vast open square. In half an hour, Daye could crawl to the main power station. In two minutes more, he could backfeed the force shield into the power grid. That would take out the whole factory. Daye had hesitated to endanger innocent bystanders, but Kerioth was clearing bystanders away.

He probably wouldn't escape. But at least Eisen Kerioth wouldn't steal I'att Armament's anti-energy field -- Daye and Strephan's own brainchild -- and get away with it.

No one would ever know what Daye had done, either, except Tinian. She knew him too well.

The thought made him smile. He crawled on.

* * *

"Why, hello, Princess Tinian."

Momentarily terrified, Tinian flung herself upright. She breathed again when she saw two familiar people standing over her. Happy's Landing's current torch singer, Twilit Hearth, wore a scandalous, shimmering sapphire-blue gown. Twilit's mate, Sprig Cheever, sported a short, neat goatee and nondescript clothing. He set a glass of Elba water in front of her.

Tinian dashed tears away from her eyes and guzzled it.

Twilit touched her shoulder. "Hey. Hey, what's wrong?"

"I -- " Tinian gulped. She needed allies, and Daye -- deft reader of strangers' intentions -- had liked these two. (*Where was he?*) "I've got to hide. I'm in big trouble."

"Hey, it couldn't be that ba -- "

"Stormtroopers. They've shut down the factory."

"No," whispered Twilit. "Where's ... you know, your prince?"

"I don't know," Tinian groaned.

Twilit seized Tinian's elbow. "Come with me. There's no time to lose."

Twilit pulled her through a dark, cluttered hallway behind the kitchen, then up one flight of stairs to a cramped little dressing sleeping room.

"Twilit, thanks," Tinian objected, "but they'll search up here." She laid her valuables under an old boot rack, then startled. She'd sliced three c-boards off the control panel. Now she had only two.

"We'll hide you in plain sight." Twilit grabbed a shimmering red gown. "But we've got to move fast. Put this on."

She'd dropped one c-board! *Concentrate, Tinian. First you've got to survive.* Tinian eyed Twilit's curves, then glanced down her size-one jumpsuit. "Twilit, it won't -- "

"You've only got minutes," said the singer. "Are you going to walk into their gunsights wearing that uniform?"

Tinian skinned out of her jumpsuit and yanked up the extravagant gown. To her shock, padding slid into position over all the right places. The singer was no more voluptuous than Tinian, not in the flesh. She glanced into the room's only mirror. Her face and someone else's body looked out.

"Not bad," said the singer, "but we can do better." She spun a pair of shoes across the floor toward Tinian and rummaged in a tattered duffel. "I assume you can sing."

"Not like you." Tinian gratefully pulled on one shoe. Too big, but it would protect her throbbing foot.

"Most Imperials wouldn't know a song sparrow from a cloud crupa. You know all my songs, I've watched your lips move." Twilit opened a jar and smeared something onto Tinian's face. Tinian submitted to several layers of paint and a rapid, hair-pulling fluff job before Twilit announced, "Break's over, Princess. Get down there and show your stuff."

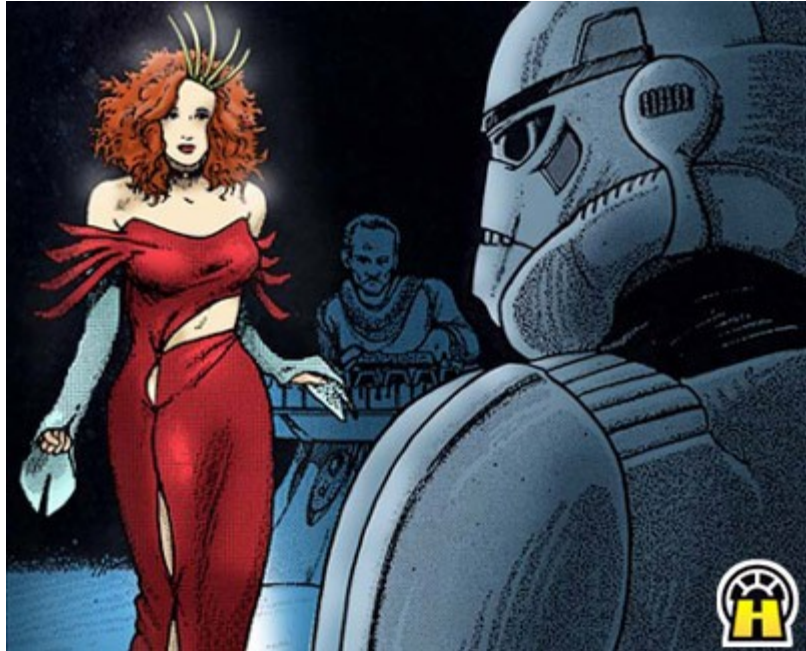
Tinian eyed the mirror again. Only the stranger looked out at her now. "Why are you doing this?" she asked. The stranger's lips moved when she spoke.

Twilit's face appeared beside the stranger's. Fire blazed in Twilit's blue eyes -- the same shade as her own, Tinian realized. "The Empire and I had a disagreement four or five systems ago," Twilit answered. "Now get down there."

"But you -- "

"I'm deathly ill. Couldn't sing another note for at least an hour. Go. Cheeve and Yccakic'll help."

Tinian tottered down the steps. Now that her eyes had adjusted, she could make out the alehouse's interior. Two human customers sat at one table, a lone Devaronian at the bar. On a clear, triangular stage raised above table level, Sprig Cheever crouched cracking his knuckles over the black, white, and green keys of a KeyBed that almost enclosed him. The other sentient band member, a Bith named Yccakic, plucked his Bottom Viol's five strings as he adjusted buttons along its tall upright neck. Redd Metalflake, the group's self-contained droid sound system, sat behind them audibly tweaking his circuitry.



"I'm ... singing?" Tinian croaked. "Twilit feels poorly."

Cheever grinned down through the stage at her. "That'll work."

Tinian climbed up to stand beside him. He played two chords she recognized, and she launched into "All I Can Ever Do" with all the guts she could muster. Now that she'd slowed down, she could only think of Daye. How could she sing, with Daye in terrible danger ... if he was alive?

Without warning, two stormtroopers sprang through Happy's front door. Tinian gulped. She covered the beat she'd missed by adlibbing a lyric. One trooper glanced at her. Immediately he swiveled away. She felt relieved ... and hurt, too. Was she that unattractive in real life?

The troopers bustled from table to table. Just as they vanished into the kitchens, a seismic rumble rocked the alehouse. Patrons slid under tables. Tinian flailed, trying to grab something, and connected with Yccakic's arm. "Off the stage!" Cheever commanded. Yccakic laid down his Viol and towed her down clear, narrow stairs, then out into the dusk-darkening street.

Three gargantuan fireballs lit the northern sky, rising under low clouds precisely where I'att Armament had stood.

Both stormtroopers dashed out of Happy's Landing. Passing without a backward glance, they sprinted up the street. A customer who'd followed Yccakic outdoors saluted the fireballs with a raised fist. "Down the rich!" he hooted. "Down the Empire! Up anarchy!"

"Hey," burbled Yccakic. "You okay, kid?"

Tinian's ears sang. Her vision blacked out from the edges inward.

She collapsed in a heap.

* * *

A beefy stranger stumbled into Happy's Landing near dawn. Tinian, still masquerading as Twilit, drooped on a bench close to Cheever. The stranger demanded a TrooperBreath, downed the chartreuse glassful, then looked around for company. Spotting Tinian and Cheever, he wobbled over. "That oughta help. I've been hunting and lifting all night," he declared.

"What's up?" Cheever set a hand casually on Tinian's shoulder.

"I just spent four hours slaving for the Empire. The head trooper rounded up all the muscle he could find out on the streets."

"What for?"

"He had us searching I'att Armament... or the crater that usedta be I'att Armament ... for survivors."

The alehouse spun around Tinian.

"Find any?" Cheever squeezed her shoulder.

The bulky newcomer shook his head. "The Big Moff's speeder was the smallest wreckage we could identify. Other than that, nothing. Totality. Looked like an inside job to me." He burped, then grinned toothily. "Some brave, suicidal lunatic musta wanted to take it away from the Empire pretty badly." He raised a glass in wordless tribute. Tinian stared. Daye, gone? All that promise ... *broken?*

Not only Daye, but Grandfather, Grandmother, and Wrrl. All her life.

She lost track of time after that. Some hours later, the band held council upstairs over the kitchens. "Time to leave Druckenwell." Cheever draped his long legs over a packing crate. "This place is too hot for me."

"Me, too," put in Twilit.

"We'll never get away," lamented a metallic monotone. Cheever had lugged Redd Metalflake upstairs and set the boxy sound droid on a stretch of floor. "Everyone picks on musicians."

Twilit folded her arms. "We'll go," she said firmly. "The last time we ignored Cheever, we nearly lost our instruments in an apartment fire. Is somebody onto us, Cheeve?"

"Not yet."

Tinian barely listened. She was in shock. *Nothing will ever touch me again. Nothing. No one. Ever.*

Yccakic flicked a series of folds around his tiny mouth. "Has anyone looked up outside? We've got a blanket of repulsorcraft sitting over Il Avali. Security will be double; at customs, triple. And we promised Tinian -- "

"We'll make it," Cheever predicted.

Twilit cleared her throat. "Fix my ID for her. I'll lie low here for a few days."

Cheever raised an eyebrow.

Twilit shrugged. "If Comus can make my ID cover Tinian; he can run me a dupe, easy. I'll be okay."

Cheever stroked his short beard. "That'll work. But Princess, about that ... luggage of yours. I don't think we can risk taking it out through Imperial Customs."

That cracked Tinian's introspection. Even with a c-board missing, those pieces might help someone recreate the anti-energy field. "Wait," she begged. "The customs people will have no idea what your instruments are supposed to look like ... right?"

Twilit shrugged. "They're musical morons," she agreed. "What are you driving at?"

"It's already in pieces," Tinian answered. "Attach them to your instruments."

Cheever stroked his goatee. "Ye-es," he drawled. "I can fit most of it to look like it's part of the KeyBed's insides."

"I'm good for a c-board or two," proclaimed Redd. A touch of reverb added confidence to his voice.

Tinian wondered if she were going crazy. She didn't care if she lived or died, but she must get that field transmitter out through customs. "Couldn't you get it off Druckenwell safer without me? If they catch me trying to pass Twilit's ID, it's the spice mines for all of us.

Affectionately, Twilit mussed Tinian's hair. "We know good people offworld," she said. "People who can use that stuff against the Empire. They'll want to talk to the I'att Princess. Guaranteed."

* * *

A door slammed. "She was there, all right," declared Woyiq. Daye shuddered. The huge, beefy man's voice jabbed daggers through his injured head.

The other human -- or was he a Gotal? Daye's eyes wouldn't focus -- turned to shush Woyiq. "Hey, keep it down!"

"Sorry." Woyiq slunk toward Daye's bedside. "Sorry." The huge human had dragged Daye out from between jagged duracrete slabs, laboring in near-total darkness at the bottom of Il Avali's deep new crater. "Really, I'm sorry --"

Daye squeezed his attendant's hand. "Did you -- "

"Wait," said the ... yes, with horns like those it had to be a Gotal. "Get over here, you big battlewagon."

Woyiq shuffled even closer.

"You found her?" Daye whispered. "She's all right?"

The beefy man laid a hand on Daye's synthflesh-bandaged shoulder. Both of his legs had been crushed, too, and one hand ... and they didn't dare carry him out to a medic. "She was at Happy's Landing, hanging out with the band. You guessed it right."

Daye swallowed. Even that small movement hurt. "Did you -- "

"I told her we found no survivors. She -- "

"Thanks. Thanks, both of you." Daye shut his eyes. He couldn't bear to hear how Tinian had taken the news of his alleged death, not yet. He half wished he could dissolve his body into nothingness and turn Woyiq's fatal pronouncement into fact.

But evidently the universe had spared him ... most of him ... for a while. He couldn't drag Tinian into the furtive existence he meant to lead now. Woyiq and his Gotal accomplice promised to sponsor him straight to the Rebellion as soon as Il Avali calmed down. The Rebellion needed his talents. They might be able to fix him up, too... somewhat.

In the meantime, he had decided it had to be kinder to let Tinian think him dead. She'd leave Druckenwell. Witty and capable, she'd make a new life.

He would never love anyone else, though. "Good-bye, Tinian," he murmured toward the wall. "May the Force be with you."

* * *

Customs bustled, quadruple anything Tinian had ever seen -- but they passed, just as Cheever predicted. Tinian followed him up a stale passageway into the transport's fourth-class hold. They found seats close to Yccakic's. Redd rode in the cargo hold, guarding the doctored instruments.

Tinian slumped down, glad this hold had no viewport. No last glimpse of Druckenwell would linger in her memory.

Alone in the galaxy except for two virtual strangers and an armload of illicit electronics, she'd find some way to help bring down the New Order. Every time she hurt Palpatine's Empire just a little bit, she'd dedicate that small victory to the memory of Daye Azur-Jamin and the life they could have had.

Force be with you, love. Leaning back, Tinian squeezed tears out of her eyes and braced for takeoff.